1-20-2015

Statement by Allen Sockabasin collected by Rachel George on January 20, 2015

Allen Sockabasin

General Information

Private or Public Statement? - Private

Statement Provider: Allen Sockabasin

Date: January 20, 2015

Location: Bangor, Maine

Previous Statement? N/A

Statement Gatherer: Rachel George

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: N/A

Recording Format: Audio

Length of Recording: 42:39

Recording

RG: Today is January 20, 2015. We're here in Bangor, Maine. My name is Rachel George and I'm here today with:

AS: Allen Sockabasin.

RG: Perfect, and the file number is M-201411-00134. Allen, have you been informed, understood and signed the consent form?

AS: Yes.

RG: And, I have to let you know that if at any point during this recording you indicate that there is a child or an elder currently in need of protection or if there is imminent risk of serious bodily harm or death, to an identifiable person or group, including yourself that information may not be protected as confidential.

AS: Uh huh (*agreeing)*.

RG: Sound okay?

AS: Uh huh.

RG: All right, could you tell me a little bit about your past employment with Tribal Child Welfare?

AS: Well I was the first Director for the Indian Child Welfare Implementation Act in Indian Township and I was appointed by, uh, the Governor of that community. I think it was John Stevens and then—I had no idea of what the Child Welfare Act was because I had been in different phases of employment and so anyway to make a long story short, I got to know the Indian Child Welfare Act. My supervisor was a Non-Native person. So I never really had any direct dealings with the finances. I just worked and—worked to try to *(pause)* better the families that eventually came to me through written complaints by the community because the children being interest. So from then, I spent almost all my tenure, with families dealing with alcoholism and drug addiction. You know, because most of the families were just saturated with those abuses and, uh—I didn't focus too much on trying to take the family and separate the family. I tried to work with the family group whether the parents or parent, in many cases it was the parent and try to keep the family unit intact.

So as a result, we had to spend a lot of time in trying to get mothers and dads, uh, well. And as time went on, I found out about [03:09.1] sexual abuse, and I had no idea that, that abuse to our children was so prevalent because it never occurred in my family and I didn't really know its existence. And again, to make a long story short, there was so many abuses, physical abuse and sexual abuse came to my attention. And of course, I always try to remedy them and not only that, but we were also in charge of the enforcement in the community because we had no guidelines. It was a very new program and I came to find out that the people that I worked for—that the people that I worked for—even though I spent a lot of time in educating the government and council members in child sexual abuse, the more I learned that many of them were participating in abuses to our children.

So I had a social service director that was employing me, [04:39.1] but my real employers were the governor and council. And I think there were, there were seven members on the council plus the Tribal Governor. So, and out of those eight people, five of them were actively abusing children. So—and then we got into law enforcement. The district attorney from Ocean County assigned a full time investigator to work for us, but they were the ones that were provided to financing. So that got to be a very sad situation with that involved, with the leadership involved and the politics in the community. Because at one time we had so many complaints, oral complaints, and then they required that people—and people would back out, so I required them to give me written complaints [inaudible 05:53.8] community—it was a very small community.

I knew everybody and I know the families from generations. I know the grandparents, the great-grandparents—you know, the dads and the moms. *(Sigh)* So it didn't take very long for me to start to burn out, you know, and I can't remember the exact periods of time, uh, that I was employed, but it was a very devastating time for me, a very sad time. Because now I'm finding out secrets that have been kept from my family. Then I decided that it would only help my community to get better. And I spent a lot of my weekends at Eastern Maine Medical Center. They had an inpatient program for our clients. So I was there every weekend. All during the time I was employed as child welfare director, that and drug addiction. So I spent almost all my tenure doing that on Saturdays and Sundays because they had family meetings

with, uh, people that were affected. And (*pause)* so I got into—beyond that threshold of alcoholism and drugs—to people that I thought were normal, and then I realized that situations in my community because of the devastation for many generations were things—really a long ways from being normal. So here I am, I come from the community, I was brought up from the community—by the community. And of course my dad and my mom were good parents, so I was never involved in my lifetime even though I heard differently in the community. But that didn't matter.

I was brought up and remembered what affected me was—work hard and be a good person and learn about our traditions [08:37.4] and practice our traditions, so—and not be involved, being involved in alcohol and drugs. So anyway—and what really, what really started discouraging me—about several years after I was—maybe two or three years after a lady had come in and she was a respectful lady. She was a teacher at the school and, uh, she came in and we knew each other. We were on the same age group, around the same age group and I would meet her several times in passing through and involved in language and she said, "I come to see if you can help me. People have been telling me that you can help me." And she said that—she said that people in the community think that you're not afraid of anybody. And I says, "Well, (*laughing)* I'm glad they think that." But, you know, I lived all my life without fear. I mean I grew up in a Native community, you know, if someone had anything against you, you had it out, you know.

And—but I'm not a loser. I said if I got involved in a fight and I lost, I want another chance. And that's how I thought all my life. So anyway, we got through that and she told me that she was being abused by her husband. And he would lock her up and keep her from going to work and school sometimes for eighteen days—

RG: (*Whispering)* Wow.

AS: —maybe more. And after she told me this story I asked her what she wanted to do. And, uh, she said she wanted to leave. I said, "Well where do you want to go." She said, "I want to get away as far as I can from here," and, uh, she had already had some mechanics down to build for her. [11:26.4] After she told me that story we had arranged for her to go underground so that he couldn't find her because he was very violent. He was a big bully. He was a bully in the community. He was a bully to her and a bully to the Tribal government. So he actually had a lot of influence in the Tribal government—that's when I started to see Tribal politics enter into the protection of our children.

So anyway, we had her, um, all set up. She changed her identity and she was ready to leave. So—I have the dates written down somewhere, but I remember very—pretty well the time that she left because it was a few days before Christmas she left and Christmas to me is important days for the family, you know. [12:37.3] So I asked her when she wanted to leave, and she said

in a couple of days. So—and she was such a brave person and then she took her kids—and I asked her what she wanted to do with the kids. She said, "I want to take them with me. I want to keep—I wanted the teenager here." So she left and I was able to manage to get her money. She wanted to move on. She changed her name. She changed her address. She changed the name of the kids and she settled in Washington State. The furthest way you can get away. And I remember her telling me the stories how she drove over the mountains and there was so much snow. She couldn't believe it. But she made it to the State of Washington. And I didn't communicate with her too much and I think she was away for maybe a year, pretty close to a year, maybe more. I didn't keep track of her. I mean I just kept records) at the office, and—

[13:48.2] So she left and she settled, changed her name, new school, changed the name for the kids and that's where she lived. One of the requirements of the people that, uh, that helped her move is that you can't call home. And you have to leave that life behind, you know, to get a new beginning for you and the kids. So anyway, she was there for a long time and, and she had a couple of trustworthy friends in the community, you know that bought her stuff that she couldn't afford like a TV and a couch and stuff like that. So anyway—as time went by she got so lonely for her home. She was a language teacher at the school, so that's what she missed quite a lot because she was so tied to the community. And then she started calling Jonathan. By this time Jonathan is sixteen, maybe seventeen.

Jonathan had started drinking, you know, and one day he got drunk and he went through his wallet and found a number. It didn't have a name on it, but he figured it out. So he called the number and of course nobody answered—so, um, there was an attorney, Tom Tureen (phonetic) that helped him and—because of course they had the area code. And, uh, the tribal government helped him. So he had the tribal attorney that helped him, he had tribal government that helped him, and he knew we were trying to keep a secret for her and she was trying to keep it secret for herself, for her safety. 'Cause she was afraid that he would kill her.

[16:20.1] So anyway, Tom Tureen solicited—and he solicited 'child find,' and got the pictures of the kids, and put them on milk cartons in that State. So when the milk cartons were delivered to the schools, you know, that's how they were exposed. Tureen and he filed for custody in the State of Washington and he got 'em back. And I'm not sure of the sequence as to, were the kids here or maybe came after, but anyway—I think it was before they filed for custody, and—no, it was after. They filed for custody and the kids come back and, uh, and she was coming back here and I met her at the airport with some sad news: that the kid that had her number, before she arrived committed suicide. And I had to tell her that when I picked her up at the airport. By that time I was away from Child Welfare, but she'd built—she trusted me, our relationship continued.

And (*sighing)* she came back, distraught and she was here in the community, at Indian Township for a period of time and, uh, she got involved with her childhood sweetheart and I don't know how long they were together, but they weren't together very long and then they claimed that he killed her and he committed suicide. After she got back here. So, that was only one case. There are several cases I worked on where we lost mom as the result of alcoholism and, and drug addiction. And it was hard to place the kids, because our efforts were to place kids within families, uh extended families and sometimes extended family members were not

the healthiest and a lot of times they were the abusers. So, uh—that's how I got there. Anyway, a lot of the people—and then the politics started, you know, another case is that one of the teachers, who was a nun, filed a complaint against—at the office, so [man opens door, apologizes for interrupting, leaves]. So—where was I?

RG: All I can make out is a blue tote now.

AS: The politics.

RG: Oh yes.

AS: And the politics started. Well of course I was enraged when that happened. It was at the end of my tenure, but then again it was another case—the mental health department, uh, even though they were [20:09.0] obligated to, they never really recognized my office as a real office. You know because of the politics that were involved. One tragedy that happened in our community was that there were two children, they got burned to death. And the prosecutor came to me and asked me if there was anything suspicious.

At the time I didn't know, okay, because it never came to our attention, but I found out that these kids—that one of the children had started several fires at different times. You see, if they had brought that to my attention, we would've been able to deliver a service to them to get help for the family, but it was never reported. So—that's when I realized that the politics was pretty heavy, you know, from the mental health department, from the Governor's office, from the Tribal Council's office and—and from the law enforcement.

So one time—and I think this is how I started, the teacher at the, at the uh, the school—came to me in involving a police officer where the police officer had taken this child, this young girl, and flung her around and then they hit the, uh, the molding on the door. But the door was open, but they hit the molding knocked her unconscious. So he started to take her to the hospital and by this time she was conscious and, um, he kept talking to her, and stopped at a couple of stores to buy her goodies, you know. Goodies that he's been buying for the kids for a long time. To make her tell the doctor that, uh—coaching her to say to the doctor that she fell. And that was brought to my attention and then I found out about it—I found out the real story of course.

My first inclination was to remove the child, right? And I couldn't remove the child because of obstacles from the mental health department and also from the Governor's office and from the law enforcement.

RG: Wow.

AS: Yeah. But unfortunately—(*correcting himself)* fortunately, the lady—the mom was able to remove them and leave, you know, after a while. But those were the things that, uh, I don't think that my people understood, um what Child Welfare was because they believed in the old concept of, you know, moms having children. And the more children that they had the more income that came in from the State. And there was no questions as to—if there was service, appropriate service delivered to the children. Because of our old belief that if you're a grampy, if you're a grandma or if you're an uncle, you're an aunt, or an older brother or older sister, you somehow took care of the kids and life continued. And so now we have me dictating that these things were wrong. You know. And since I was not--my father, my mother, were great parents—my mom died when I was eleven, my dad had tuberculosis, but we still maintained the family unit and attacked. And, uh, so this was really different for me.

RG: Yeah.

AS: [24:24.1] Very violent, you know. And I always thought that sometimes when children went, they were taken away—they were taken away from the community and put into schools, got educated, at least high school education. Well we didn't have any—up until the time that I was Tribal Chief in the community. We only had one graduate from high school and then, you know, these kids being taken away, were at least being educated. Then they came back and it was the same scenario—having children and having children that were abused.

RG: Mmm hm.

AS: And—under the protection of child welfare.

RG: How long were you the—how long did you work there for?

AS: I think, if I remember correctly, I think about five years. But at the end I was already—after being involved with the death of my people, I'm supposed to be protecting. You know, because, and not only it was the people that had children and the children themselves—they were all in high—they were all in the same risk you know. But the end result—[26:13.1] fast forward to now, twenty years later. I see these kids today, I see these kids as adults. Many of them are chronically addicted to alcohol or drugs. You know, abusing themselves and abusing their spouses, and abusing the community. So, I was first in line to learn about this, to know about this, I mean you could've had me in the conference for a couple years now and I never understood it, but to live it, to be involved in it—to be involved—such violent deaths, you know, firsthand. You know, was very, um, I can't even describe the hurt that I have.

I mean I've been—I've worked as an activist, you know, all my life, ever since I was a little boy. You know, and trying to protect our people, protect them from either bullies in the community or protecting my friends that were being beaten up by men, you know, I always came in defense for them. And now, coming back—and I really didn't have any education in social work. I didn't understand a lot of things. I went through several and many, many workshops trying to understand our community. But the issue I was having was that (*pauses)* by that time money from the federal government was rolling in and people got comfortable

with their salaries that they got so they put them first before the, the community.

RG: Mmm hm. What was—

AS: And, and initially when TRC came to us, I thought, "Well, another program," you know. But since then I've learned through working here, I mean I've been working her for twelve years and I've seen everything, you know. Um—you know that little news that we got coming here, you know. And these are people from our community. These are people that moved from our community to make things better, but you know how can you make things better if you don't have a high school education? If you don't—didn't graduate from grade school—how do you make things better when, uh, slumlords can rent an apartment for $800 and have it subsidized by the government? The apartments that are so dilapidated that should be condemned, but they can rent them. And so anyway that, you know—I see a lot of death here, though I can't talk about it. What's different with us is that if people live beyond that service area—like this is a service area of Indian Township. Ninety miles from that, if you lived in Bangor, you can't, uh, you can't be serviced. Even though you have the same issues. You belong to the Tribe. You were born into the Tribe. So this new government that I call, uh, sets all these rules and regulation. You know, to prevent people—these people to get services from the community you know. Which is a big form of abuse of our people. And what happens is that, uh, when someone dies in our clientele, not only do we feel sad, but we have to be able to somehow have and collect money for their burial.

RG: (*Whispered)* Yeah.

AS: And although we get money from municipalities, but it's not too much. And if they have worked, uh, in a period time in their life then they're eligible for $250, but to be cremated—the basic cost of a cremation today is $1000. And many of our people in this population have never seen $1000, you know, because they've been living on fixed income, you know, and so on.

RG: Yeah.

AS: So the conditions never really improve and moms that have children, continue to have children. You know, so they can be eligible for a lot of programs. So it's really—the conditions haven't improved from the time I was a boy to today, when it comes to families and moms. You know, and that's my issue with the protection for moms, you know and—you know of course at a national level, you know, you put on a different hat.

RG: Yeah.

AS: So—I eventually got laid off, because I was rattling a lot of cages, you know, and I wrote a—I wrote a child welfare manual.

RG: Uh huh.

AS: And, uh, it was confiscated, so—but that didn't surprise me. So that was the kind of thing that happened in my tenure at Child Welfare. That it was not the State that was placing Native children. Our problem was the children being in jeopardy by our own community.

RG: Yeah. What was your relationship like with the State while you were working there?

AS: Well, they were glad—they were glad to have me because it took a lot of responsibility away from them you know. And I operated under the same policy as they did.

RG: Yeah.

AS: You know.

RG: Did you have many kids that were placed—uh, did you have to remove many kids in your time?

AS: Absolutely.

RG: And were many of them placed in Non-Native homes or did you—

AS: They were placed in extended families that were, that were not subject to any of the abuses that we encountered.

RG: Yeah. Did you find that when you were working with, um, the State, were they contacting the tribe when they became aware of a Native kid that was—

AS: Absolutely, um, kids that were left at Ronald McDonalds House.

RG: Yeah.

AS: You know? People would leave children there at the doorstep. And the State of course—the city would take possession and then (*sound of hand sliding on table)*—of course they were presented—and then, and they were given to the State and the State of course would present them to me. So there were no kids that were at any—extended time—were, uh, were left without, my participation. You know.

RG: Uh huh, that's great.

AS: Yeah.

RG: What do you think is needed? What do you see as areas for improvement?

AS: Well some of the areas of improvement that I focused on was to educate the Tribal leaders. And I think we were doing well, in educating the leaders, and having workshops and, uh, awareness of what happens to children, you know? When they're sexually abused, when they're physically abused, you know, when they grow up in alcoholic homes.

RG: Yeah.

AS: Uh, it's like—you know I see the families. I still see the families and I often ask them, what do you, I says, "What happened to Jonathan [?]" "Oh, Jonathan's a drug dealer," you know, in the community. And we had a program recently, which was a political program [35:41.5] on—on methadone clinics. You know where people spend a lot of time, uh, in recruiting people from the methadone clinics.

RG: Yeah.

AS: And, uh, of course now they have [inaudible 36:04].

RG: Yeah.

AS: We get, uh, people from those communities, you know.

RG: Yeah.

AS: But it's still a whole new drug—so, uh (*coughs)*. My remedy is to make people feel, make people feel that we have a problem, we have an issue in our community. And the only worse—we have a political problem. We have people, we have a community that's really ill, you know, and we need to educate to make things better. Not politically, but to make things better for the whole entire family.

RG: Yeah. Yeah.

AS: You know and (*pause)*. And of course now, you know, I'm in the initial stage of taking another child, as a result of Child Welfare. You know, and I think Sharon and I have been pretty successful with our own children and the children, um, that we've been involved with. I think we got a third child coming (*pause)*. There's a guy by the name of Brian, um, who wants to talk to you—wants to talk to somebody.

RG: Okay.

AS: Okay. And I think I've got him convinced that this truth and reconciliation is good for our people and good for them. And he's just now started to have children—uh, and I would like to have him to be interviewed because he really had a story—

RG: Absolutely.

AS: —about what happens in Indian Child Welfare, and in Indian Child Welfare Act currently.

RG: Absolutely.

AS: Yeah so—obviously I can tell you some good news. But that was my experience, you know, unless you have any more questions.

RG: Is there anything else you want to add?

AS: Well, it—it has given me personally, (*sound of papers moving)* a tremendous wealth of information. You know, uh, not only here where I work, but with the people that I continue to counsel.

RG: Yeah.

AS: I—I don't know if you can call it counsel—a person that doesn't get paid. But I think goes back to all traditional beliefs, counseling people from our community. So, I have those people, and I'm still involved in, um—in making sure that our rights as individuals are intact. Either at the Tribal government level or national level. The one other thing is that—that—hinders, I think, is that to have this knowledge, to try to educate those people that once were your enemies—not as enemies because of politics but enemies because they were involved in situations where they were abusive. And they know that you know the information, you know? And—so, but those things are going away because they see me in the community being where I'm at, still. I have never changed. If there's a situation of abuse and if I have any control, then I can work on it and correct it. You know? But I have a lot of allies in the community, you know, and, you know, I play music for the kids. Ad I'm very active in in the language and something that can be very powerful in the healing of our people. But now that's gone to disarray too, as the result of politics, you know? And uh—but I think we made some great strides. We've got people involved now that are members of the Tribe. They're well-educated, honest individuals that I feel that are here to help our people, you know? And they might do a little minute part in their involvement—like, I have you know? I think that, uh. Three nuns walked up to me at the funeral of my friend and said to me, "Well that's really too bad, what happened—such a tragedy." And one of those nuns were in school with the lady that I lost. I says, "Well, you know, we have to go through what we go through to get better. To make our communities better by making Native people aware of what's going on here, you know, because it's the only way that we'll get better."

RG: Yeah.

AS: And, uh, and I think that's all I have unless you have any questions.

RG: No, that's it. Thank you so much, Allen.

AS: You're welcome.

[END OF RECORDING]